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ABSTRACT

Since broadcasters are mandated by the Federal Communication Commission to ascertain community needs prior to applying for or renewing licenses, their concern for finding effective audience-analysis tools is generally great. This paper briefly surveys the research conducted on expression of opinion through viewer and listener letter-writing and describes the results of a study of listener letter-writing following a radical format change in a Peoria, Illinois, radio station. Analysis of data, obtained from a questionnaire, was performed in two parts. First, the respondents surveyed were described according to traditional demographic variables. Second, one-time and "chronic" writers (those who had written more than once) were differentiated according to their responses to various items gauging psychological factors and media use. Data suggested that letter writers were generally older, educated, white, female, and employed in a professional or white-collar occupation. Letters written by these respondents tended to stress complaints rather than praise. Roughly half of the letters received were written by "chronic" respondents; few differences between this group and one-time writers were found. (KS)

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CITIZEN FEEDBACK TO A CHANGE IN RADIO STATION FORMAT: MULTIPLE VERSUS ONE TIME LETTER WRITERS

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Broadcasters are concerned, by mandate of the Federal Communication Commission, to ascertain community needs prior to applying or renewing a license. The audience member has a variety of possibilities for input into the ascertainment process ranging from being a respondent in a market survey to providing information as a community leader. However, neither of these options allow the audience member to provide input on his or her own initiative. An alternate, and many times overlooked, method of providing input into the ascertainment process is by writing a letter to a broadcast station. In fact, most broadcasters ask for this input prior to applying for a license renewal. However, some doubt exists in the minds of many researchers concerning the representativeness of public opinion these letters can offer the broadcaster in the ascertainment process. Since most letters become part of a station's public file suggests that the FCC considers them one viable source of information for the station manager in the ascertainment process.

Some research has been conducted to determine whether letters to a broadcast station do, in fact, represent market perceptions of important issues crucial to the ascertainment process. McGuire and LeRoy surveyed two Florida cities to identify differences attributed to demographic variables, alienation, perceptions of local and national problems, and community involvement between letter writers and the general population. They found letter writers to be generally: white, more educated, in higher income brackets, employed in professional occupations, older, and less alienated. Considering perceptions of problems, letter writers were more able to name both local and national problems when compared to their counterparts in the two communities. Considering community involvement, letter writers were more interested in public affairs, were most likely to vote, and belonged to more civic groups or clubs. Letter writers also used the mass media more than respondents in

the community sample. McGuire and LeRoy concluded that letters written to broadcast stations can be a valuable tool in the ascertainment process, but should not be the only source of data when determining community needs.[1]

The remaining research focusing on letter writers to broadcast stations has basically involved the description of these contactors in terms of demographic variables, media use and the content of letters. Some of this early research has attempted to determine who writes fan mail. For example, Sayre found these letter writers to be from more urban areas. Further, women were more likely to praise a given radio program. Bogart found that letter writers were not representative of a radio program featuring the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.[2]

Whan was also interested in locating and describing letter writers in his series of Iowa radio surveys. He found contactors to generally be: female, living in rural areas, older, and more educated. Considering the content of these letters, most were likely to be complimentary rather than condemnatory.[3]

More recent research has also been conducted to determine who contacts broadcast stations. In a study of contactors to a radio talk show, Crittendon found callers to be: conservative, of high community duty, older, Republican, less educated, and in blue collar occupations when compared to a sample of community residents and leaders.[4] These findings were supported in a study conducted by Singer.[5]

In one of the few studies using random sampling methods to locate contactors, LeRoy and Ungurait found significant correlations between the number of letters written to a broadcast station and the ability of the writer to identify national or local problems. Further, contactors were most likely to be: male, young, more educated, and in professional occupations. Also, as in most research into contactors, the majority of letters involved a complaint.[6] Contactors to broadcasters were found also to be more educated, but slightly older by Williams and LeRoy in a study of eight Florida cities.[7]

A third study conducted by Felsenthal considered letters written in response to three episodes of "All In the Family." Positive letters concerning one program were from more educated writers; while less literate letters tended to be written by viewers upset with a second program. Further, extremist letters were from older writers and likely to be postmarked from Florida, suggesting that the authors were retired. Conversely, letters written in support of a third episode were from younger viewers. Interestingly, the content of letters opposing the various programs varied based on presentation of the issues. Felsenthal concluded that letters analyzed in this study may or may not be representative of the viewers of "All In the Family."[8] However, no quantitative data was offered in support of this assumption.

Considering feedback to network television, Lichty and Bailey mailed questionnaires to writers of letters received by NBC in response to a news story on an execution of a North Vietnamese soldier by General Luan. They found letter writers to be: from urban areas, younger, more educated, information seekers, politically active, and frequent letter writers.[9]

The last of three studies designed to investigate feedback to specific television programs was conducted by Abel and Thornton. Based on research identifying writers of letters to newspaper editors, Abel and Thornton predicted that responders to television editorials would be from higher socioeconomic classes, more politically active, and more socially responsible. In the comparison of these responders to a sample of non-responders, Abel and Thornton found responders to be very similar to their non-responder counterparts when demographic variables were considered. However, responders were more: politically active, socially responsible, and likely to judge television less credible. The authors concluded that responders to television editorials did not fit the "narrow elite" descriptor of letter to the editor writers described in earlier research. Further, television editorials seemed to function as

a forum for discussion of community problems as the responders were demographically similar to the non-responder sample.[10]

With the exception of the studies conducted by Feldenthal and Abel and Thornton, few studies dealing with contactors to the mass media have dealt with evaluations of specific programs broadcast on either television or radio. Further, despite recent FCC concern for radio format changes, no studies have been conducted concerning program philosophies. Given the recent concern for such format changes in Chicago and New York and the possibility of future FCC action in the area of programming, a study of letter writers in response to programming decisions was in order.

A second avenue for future research in the area of contactors to the mass media involves the differentiation of the "chronic" letter writer identified in past research from the contactor who writes just one letter in response to a specific programming decision or issue. An analysis of letters written in response to a format change provides an opportunity to meet both of these needs in feedback research. This study was designed to suggest answers for both of these research questions by surveying contactors writing in response to a recent format change instituted by a local radio station.

The radio station, located in Peoria, Illinois changed its format from "easy listening" music to one offering "adult rock," in October, 1974. The stimulus for the change was produced by the entry of a competing "easy listening" station into the market resulting in a reduction in profits for the station of concern in this study. Realizing that only a programming change would increase profits, the station management decided to change their format. This radical change of programming philosophy produced some animosity in the station's small but dedicated audience. Some of these listeners wrote to condemn the programming decision. This study involves the analysis of these letter writers.

METHODOLOGY

Seventy-four letters, written in response to the format change, were obtained from the station's public file. Three waves of questionnaires were mailed, between October and January (1975/1976), to sixty-one contactors who included complete addresses in their letters. Fifty-four of these questionnaires were returned, resulting in a completion rate of 89%. The questionnaire contained the traditional media use and demographic items used in most past studies of contactors to the mass media. In addition, questions measuring alienation[11] and gratifications associated with the use of the mass media were included to further describe letter writers to the radio station. The following analysis involves a description of letter writers and a differentiation of the "chronic" and "one time" letter writers using these variables.

RESULTS

The analysis of the data obtained from the questionnaire was performed in two parts. First, the contactors surveyed in the study were described based on their responses to the traditional demographic variables. Second, the one time and chronic writers (written more than one letter) were differentiated based on various psychological and media use items. These analyses are discussed below.

THE CONTACTORS

The description of letter writers responding to the questionnaire involved the responses to the various demographic variables. Considering age first, ninety-three percent of the respondents were over thirty years of age. However, contactors were not predominately in one specific age category. Further, most contactors were in either professional (doctors, lawyers, etc.), service (sales or personal services), or white collar (nurses, etc.) positions (65%). Seventeen percent of the respondents

were employed in blue collar occupations; while the remainder were equally distributed between management and farmer categories. Thirty-seven percent of the sample had at least a high school degree, 24% had attended college, and 22% had a college degree. In all, 56% of the sample had graduated from high school and had at least attended college.

The race, sex and marital status of the contactors was considered next. All of the letter writers were white. Thirty percent of respondents in the study were males. The married contactors comprised 74% of the sample; while only 17% were either divorced or widowed.

Based on the above results, letter writers surveyed in this study were older; in professional, service or white collar occupations; well educated; white; female, and married. Further, when the types of letters written were considered, most involved both criticism and complaint, closely followed by letters involving only a complaint. The following analysis was designed to differentiate "chronic" and "one time" letter writers.

CHRONIC AND ONE TIME CONTACTORS

Approximately half (26) of the respondents in this study had written more than one letter to a radio or television station. The remainder (28) had written one letter. Respondents only writing one letter were classified as "one time" contactors; while people writing more than one letter were identified as "chronic" contactors. A variety of t-tests were computed to determine differences between these two groups of letter writers. This analysis included: (1) demographic descriptors, (2) alienation, (3) media use, (4) gratifications attributed to the media, (5) interest in local and national affairs, and (6) types and effects of letters.

Demographic Descriptors

Demographic variables considered in this analysis included: age, education, membership in civic clubs, and opinion leadership (measured on a Likert scale). The only statistically significant differences from the t-tests between "chronic" and "one time" contactors resulted when club membership was considered. Writers of more than one letter were more likely to belong to more civic clubs ($p \leq .05$, $t = 3.78$, 52df) than "one time" writers. No differences were found for age ($p = .53$), education ($p = .20$), or opinion leadership ($p = .16$).[12]

Alienation

Responses to seven questions measuring alienation were subjected to a varimax factor analysis. The resulting factor structure is displayed in Table I.

TABLE I ABOUT HERE

The only factor resulting from this analysis accounted for 76% of the variance. Variables meeting the criterion of a primary loading of at least $\pm.40$ and a secondary loading of less than $\pm.40$ included responses to five point likert-type items eliciting agreement or disagreement concerning: the apathy of government officials (apathy), voting has an impact on government operations (voting), dependability of most people (dependability), insignificance of personal opinions (opinions), and the tendency for the rich to get richer and the poor - poorer (income). Two items designed to measure a general feeling of alienation, the complications of government (complicate) and the inability to keep up with a fast moving world (fast moving) failed to meet the loading criteria.

An alienation scale was constructed from responses to all seven variables displayed in Table I using procedures outlined by Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner, and Bent.[13] Variables not loading on the primary factor were included in this scale to

control for their effect on the total alienation score of each respondent. The formula for this scale, according to Nie, et.al., was:

f_i = factor score coefficient (variable value - variable mean)/$\sqrt{\quad}$ of the variable

Scores resulting from the alienation scale for the two groups of letter writers were then subjected to a t-test. No statistically significant differences resulted. Therefore, "chronic" letter writers in this study were neither more nor less alienated than the "one time" contactors.

Media Use

Past research has suggested that a use of the various media has some relationship to the likelihood of an audience member to write a letter to a broadcast station. Therefore, a media use scale was constructed to test for differences between the two types of letter writers discussed above. Variables included in this scale, as outlined by McGuire and LeRoy, were the use of: television, network television news, local television news, radio, newspaper, Time Magazine, Newsweek, National Observer, and U.S. News and World Report. A respondent not using a medium received no score (0). Respondents minimally using a specific medium were given a value of one (1); while respondents exceeding average use of a medium were assigned a two (2). For example, if a respondent watched network news more than three times a week, he or she received a two. If viewing was more than once but less than three times a week, a one was assigned. Cumulative index scores resulting from respondents' use of the media were then used to differentiate chronic and one time responders. No significant differences were found. Therefore, chronic letter writers did not use the media more nor less than the one time responders.

Gratifications

A theoretical notion advanced by other researchers suggest that gratifications attributed to the media affect how the media are used.[14] It follows that these

gratifications should also be related to feedback to the media. For example, listeners not satisfied with a broadcast station's programming should be more likely to write a letter to the management concerning their complaints, especially since condemnatory letters normally outnumber complimentary letters. Further, these letter writers should be more likely to attribute specific gratifications to a medium than listeners not writing letters. Hypothetically, the number of letters written should increase as dissatisfaction with the performance of gratifications of a station increase. This notion was tested by comparing "chronic" and "one time" contactors for gratifications associated with the media.

A similar factor analysis, as reported above, was conducted to establish an index of needs gratified by the media for contactors. Three sets of items - for television, radio and newspapers - were developed to measure some of these needs. Respondents were asked if television was their major source of entertainment, performed a companionship function, and provided a good source of information. Questions dealing with needs gratified by radio included: information (about the world and other people), enjoyment without concentration, and emotional uplifting. Needs for newspapers were: vicarious entertainment, excitement, information, interpretation and problem solution. The resulting factor analysis can be found in Table 2.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Since gratifications were matched for each of three media in the questionnaire, a logical prediction would be the emergence of three factors, corresponding to these media. However, the above analysis produced four factors (Table 2), accounting for 100% of the total variance. Factor I might easily be labeled a television factor, as all three variables meeting the liberal criterion of $\pm$.40 pertained to needs gratified by television and accounted for 58% of the variance. Factor 2 was comprised of three variables primarily tapping emotional dimensions or needs of radio

and newspapers, accounting for 21% of the variance. The third factor, news, consisted of four variables and accounted for 13% of the variance. Note that this factor overlapped with the first two for television information and vicarious dimensions. The news and television factors may be expected to overlap as television is often named as the most important source of information.[15] The vicarious variable could also be expected to overlap between news and emotion factors as vicarious experiences may both affect one's emotions and information needs. Further, much of the news presented by the media involve some degree of vicarious excitement. The final factor, interpretation, accounted for 8% of the total variance and only included items measuring needs satisfied by newspapers. Logically, this finding has much face validity as many news consumers turn to newspapers for additional information concerning specific issues.[16]

Factor scales were constructed using the Nie, et.al. formula for each of the four factors. T-tests between respondents writing one letter and those writing more than one were then calculated for each factor score. Only two of the four analyses produced interesting results. The chronic contactors were less likely to use newspapers to perform an interpretation function ($p = .06$, $t = 1.92$, 52df). Second, although not statistically significant, multiple contactors were somewhat less likely to use the media to gratify emotional needs ($p = .28$, $t = 1.08$, 51df). The remaining t values were less than one (1).

Interest in Local and National Affairs

Respondents were also asked to register their interest in local and national affairs on a five point likert-type scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.[17] No statistically significant differences were found between "one time" and "chronic" letter writers.

Types and Effects of Letters

Believing that "chronic" letter writers, the writers of more than one letter to broadcasters, would also write many letters to other mass institutions, respondents were asked how many letters they had written to businesses, government officials, and newspapers. The "chronic" writer to broadcasters was more likely to write letters to businesses ($p \leq .05$, $t = 2.91$, 47df) and to the government ($p \leq .05$, $t = 2.32$, 52df). No differences were found for letters to the editors of newspapers and the believed effect these letters had on various institutions. "Chronic" writers were not more likely to believe that their letters resulted in a desired effect.

DISCUSSION

The description of contactors supports past research, e.g., LeRoy and Ungurait. Letter writers were generally older, more educated, white, female and employed in a professional or white collar occupation. Further, letters written by respondents in this survey tended to stress complaints rather than praise. In fact, of the letters received in response to the format change, only one praised the station for its decision. However, the preponderance of critical letters was probably affected by unhappy former listeners, as audience loyalties to the new format had yet to be developed.

About half the letters received by the radio station were written by "chronic" contactors. Few differences were found between these letter writers and the contactor just dissatisfied with the format change. The only significant differences resulted when civic group membership, number of letters written to businesses and the government, and needs served by newspapers were considered. These findings suggest that the "chronic" writer to broadcast stations is also responsible for many letters received by other large institutions supporting the "narrow elite" of letter writers first identified by Sussman.[18] Further, this letter writer is more

likely to be active in the community than the contactor writing in response to one issue, i.e., the format change. However, the "chronic" contactors have few other idiosyncratic characteristics to differentiate them from the "one time" writer. They were not more educated, older, or more likely to be professionals as might be hypothesized from past research. Further, they were not more or less alienated nor used the media more than the "one time" writer as found by McGuire and LeRoy. Considering gratifications, "chronic" contactors were somewhat more conscious of needs satisfied by the media. However, this consciousness did not manifest itself in statistically significant differences in this study.

Probably one of the more interesting findings of this study was the failure to find significant differences between the two groups of letter writers for the believed effect of letters written to institutions. Based on these findings, multiple contactors probably write letters for their cathartic effect identified by Davis and Rarick,[19] rather than for instituting desired changes. Further, finding differences between "chronic" and "one time" writers for contacts to businesses and the government suggests a variable not yet considered in feedback research - saliency. The actions of government and businesses may be more salient for the "chronic" writer, especially since these respondents were generally more active in the community. The "one time" writer probably had not been stimulated to write a letter before the format change. The change in programming instituted by the radio station produced sufficient concern to result in a letter. However, even these writers were more typical of the contactor identified in past research than the stations' former audience, adding further support for the "narrow elite" description of letter writers.

The external validity of these findings is an obvious limitation of this study because of the relatively small size of the two letter writer groups. However, the group size should not be a deterrant to evaluating the import of this line of research.

As found in earlier studies, letter writers comprise a very small segment of virtually any general population, around twenty percent, at most. Therefore, letter writers can be considered a fairly unique subgroup in a general population. Consequently, the size of the groups in this study, as compared to other research, seems somewhat less important. Further, even a casual inspection of previous studies in the area of feedback communications will find little research concerning letter writers. One obvious reason for this paucity of research in this area is that letter writers are difficult to locate. Further complicating this issue is that "chronic" letter writers are even fewer in number than people who have written only one letter to a social institution. The situation considered in this study, a format change, provided an ideal opportunity to study both the one time and "chronic" letter writer without undertaking a massive sample of a general population. Therefore, future research might consider letters written in response to other format changes. Unfortunately, this research will probably be limited to format changes such as the one considered in this study. For, as past research indicates, letter writers tend to be somewhat older than the general population. Consequently, format changes which show the most promise for future research would be those changing from an older targeted audience, to a format aimed at a younger audience, especially if letter writings is viewed as cathartic for the author.

With these limitations in mind, the "chronic" contactor in this study is probably not much different from the "one time" writer. The findings of the current study suggest that a need for the release of frustrations, or catharsis, may be a motivator for writing letters to mass institutions. However, why some people need more catharsis (the chronics) than others is a question remaining for future research. Again, this study suggests that the saliency of the frustrator may explain why some

people write more letters to mass institutions than others. The connection between saliency, catharsis and feedback to mass institutions such as the mass media should be another topic for future research in this area.

TABLE 1

FACTOR ANALYSIS OF
ALIENATION ITEMS

Variables	Primary Loading	Secondary Loading
Complicated	-.06	.38
Apathy	*.76	.22
Fast Moving	.22	*.66
Voting	*-.60	.12
Dependability	*-.53	.06
Opinions	*.52	.31
Income	*.52	.15

*Meets criterion of ±.40

TABLE 2

FACTOR ANALYSIS OF
GRATIFICATION ITEMS

Variable	Television	Emotions	News	Interpretation
Television				
Entertainment	.84			
Companionship	.89			
Information	.52		.48	
Radio				
Emotional Uplift		.41		
Information (World)			.76	
Concentration			.63	
Information (People)				
Newspaper				
Problem Solution				
Vicariousness		.42	.41	
Excitement		.92		
Information				.70
Interpretation				.40

FOOTNOTES

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[2] J. Sayre, "Progress in Radio Fan-mail Analysis," Public Opinion Quarterly, 3:272-278 (1939); Leo Bogart, "Fan Mail for the Philharmonic," Public Opinion Quarterly, 13:423-434 (1949).

[3] F. L. Whan, "The 1952 Iowa Radio-Television Audience Survey," Des Moines, Iowa, Central Broadcasting Co., 1952.

[4] John Crittendon, "Democratic Functions of the Open Mike Radio Forum," Public Opinion Quarterly, 35:200-210 (1971/1972).

[5] Benjamin Singer, Feedback and Society (Lexington, Mass: D. C. Heath, 1973).

[6] David LeRoy and Donald Ungurait, "Ascertainment Surveys: Problem Perception and Voluntary Station Contact," Journal of Broadcasting, 19:23-30 (1975).

[7] Wenmouth Williams and David LeRoy, "Citizen Feedback: A Review of the Literature," Communication Research Center, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, March, 1974.

[8] Norman Felsenthal, "The Audience and the Reviewers: An Analysis of Viewer Letters and Critics' Columns Relating to the Television Program 'All in the Family'." paper presented to the Speech Communication Association, Houston, 1975.

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[10] John Abel and Lee Thornton, "Responders and Non-responders to Television Editorials: A Comparison," Journalism Quarterly, 52:477-484 (1975).

[11] Scales were constructed using items discussed by McGuire and LeRoy and also found in John P. Robinson and Phillip Shaver, Measures of Social Psychological Attitudes, Ann Arbor, Mich: Institute for Social Research, 1973), pp. 266-267.

[12]Opinion leadership was measured as suggested by F. Shoemaker and E. Rogers, Communication of Innovations (New York: Free Press, 1971).

[13]N. Nie, C. Hull, J. Jenkins, K. Steinbrenner and D. Bent, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), pp. 488-489.

[14]A theoretical treatment of gratifications research can be found in J. Blumler and E. Katz, The Uses of Mass Communications (Beverly Hills, Calif: Sage Publications, 1975). Items used to measure various gratifications were found in: V. Troldahl and R. Skolnik, "The Meaning People Have for Radio," Journal of Broadcasting, 12:57-67 (1967/1968); J. McLeod, S. Ward and K. Tancill, "Alienation and Uses of the Mass Media," Public Opinion Quarterly, 29:583-594 (1965); McGuire and LeRoy, pp. 23-26.

[15]Roper Organization, Trends in Public Attitudes toward Television and Other Mass Media 1959-1974 (New York: Television Information Office, 1975), p. 2.

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[17]McGuire and LeRoy.

[18]L. Sussman, "Mass Political Letter Writings in America: The Growth of an Institution," Public Opinion Quarterly, 23:201-212 (1959/1960).

[19]H. Davis and G. Rarick, "Functions of Editorials and Letters to the Editor," Journalism Quarterly, 41:108-109 (1964).